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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the importance of teaching "register" in the Spanish as a second language classroom. Generally speaking, register means "variety according to use." A register is what you are speaking at the time determined by what you are doing (the nature of the social activity being engaged in), and an expression of diversity of social process. Registers are ways of saying different things. This study addresses the following questions: How does register fit in with theories of communicative language learning? How do presently available teaching materials deal with register? To answer this last question, 10 Spanish language texts currently in use for second and third year foreign language learners are surveyed. It is concluded that a more overt and systematic approach to dealing with register is needed in order to sensitize students to register variation if students of Spanish are to acquire true proficiency in Spanish. Suggestions are also made for how register variation might be taught. (KFT)

## Focus on Register in the Spanish Language Classroom

*Keith Watts, Grand Valley State University*

### 1 Introduction

While it may seem obvious that a focus on register variation should be a key component of any second language course, the following anecdotes suggest that register may be given short shrift in the typical U.S. Spanish second language classroom. For obvious reasons, I will not reveal who the persons involved in these interpersonal communications are – let's call them "Smith" and "Jones". Both teach Spanish at U.S. universities. Smith is a very well-respected professor at a school with a top-ranked Spanish program, and both he and Jones are considered to speak Spanish exceedingly well. Both of the following episodes occurred in the early stages of Smith and Jones's professional careers. The first anecdote: Smith was immersed in conversation with a native Spanish speaker in the latter's home country. At one point in the conversation, the native speaker interrupted to make this evaluation: "Hablas muy bien el español, pero siempre eres tan formal, y nunca hablas con modismos." The second anecdote involves a scene that transpired at the beginning of the school year at a U.S. university. Jones had just met his new secretary, a student from Puerto Rico. Shortly thereafter, he overheard her remark to another student, a native Colombian, "¿ya has hablado con ese profesor de español? ¡Qué risa! ¡Habla como si leyera un libro!" What went wrong with these two colleagues' attempts to converse with native Spanish speakers? The ability to incorporate register variation was not a feature of their second language competence.

Second language teaching at the university level has been informed in recent decades by the continually-evolving communicative language approach, which has as its primary goal the

development of communicatively-proficient second language speakers. Ideally, students who

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successfully complete a four year program of instruction that is informed by such theories of second language acquisition would have near-native proficiency. Sociolinguistic theory recognizes that native speech is a form of socio-cultural interaction. Members of the speech community share the same phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical systems, of course, but fluency in the mother tongue includes sociolinguistic behavior appropriate to different contexts and/or functions of language use. A key component of this extralinguistic competence is register. I use the term in the Hallidayan sense for the purpose of this study. I address the following questions: How does register variation fit within theories of communicative language learning? And how do teaching materials available to us deal with register? Here I summarize the findings of an analysis of ten of the Spanish language texts currently in use at the second- and third-year levels. I will also suggest that a more overt and systematic approach to sensitizing students to register variation is needed at all levels of language instruction if the explicit goal is to enable our Spanish majors to acquire true proficiency in Spanish. Finally, I will suggest some ways in which register variation can be taught.

## **2 What is register variation?**

Before proceeding, it will be useful to precisely define register variation. Halliday (1978; 1989) provides an admirably complete description of its components (refer to Table 1 for a full description). At the base of the Hallidayan treatment of this communicative feature lies the notion that “[t]he structure of sentences and other units is explained by derivation from their functions [...] Language is as it is because of the functions it has evolved to serve in people’s lives” (1978: 5). Halliday (1978; 1989) defines three principal controlling variables. *Field* is the subject or activity of the communicative situation: a conversation among friends, a speech, or

correspondence between business people, to name some examples. *Tenor* refers to the relationship between those interacting in the communicative exchange. For example, is that relationship formal or informal? Is speaker status equal or unequal? Is it necessary to be polite and show respect? Is there a significant age difference between communicators? The third variable, *mode*, refers to the means of communication involved, the symbolic organization of register. Is the text spoken, written, or non-verbal? What is the rhetorical mode? What do participants expect the language to do in that situation (e.g. persuade)? And of course, native speakers automatically vary their lexicon and grammatical structures using the rules of register variation that they acquire along with native language structures.

**Table 1: Halliday's Description of Register Variation**

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**Register** = variety according to use

A register is:

- what you are speaking at the time
- determined by what you are doing (the nature of the social activity being engaged in)
- an expression of diversity of social process (social division of labor)

In principle registers are:

- ways of saying different things
- systems that differ in semantics and lexicogrammar

Extreme cases:

- restricted languages
- languages for special purposes

Typical instances:

- occupational varieties: technical (scientific, technology), institutional (e.g. doctor – patient), other contexts having special structures and strategies (e.g. classroom)

Principal controlling variables:

- field = the type of social action
- tenor = speakers' role relationships
- mode = symbolic organization

Characterized by:

- major distinctions between oral and written codes
  - language in action / language in reflection
- 

(Halliday 1978: 35; Halliday 1989: 43)

### **3 What is communicative competence and how does register fit into the equation?**

The model of second language competence that informs this paper was first proposed by Canale and Swain in the early 1980's, and has since greatly influenced the thinking of scholars who have striven to understand the nature of communicative language competence (Omaggio Hadley 1993: 7). The Canale/Swain model includes four competencies: grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic. They define sociolinguistic competence as follows:

Grammatical forms can be used or understood appropriately in various contexts to convey specific communicative functions (e.g. describing, narrating, eliciting information, persuading ...). Such factors as topic, role of the participants, and setting will determine the appropriateness of the attitude conveyed by speakers and their choice of style or register.

(Omaggio Hadley 1993: 60)

Register thus figures prominently in this model; however, Canale and Swain are not the only language scholars who stress the importance of students' knowledge of register variation. It is a key component of Byram's (1997: 71) definition of Intercultural Communicative Competence for second language learners. And in her interactional sociolinguistics approach to teaching, Schiffirin (1996: 323) explains that communicative competence includes "knowledge that governs appropriate use of language in concrete situations of everyday life." Batchelor and Pountain (1992) include discussion of register throughout their recent grammar of contemporary usage, and Butt and Benjamin (1996) give this feature of communicative competence a prominent place in their reference grammar. But even though its importance has been thus emphasized in the literature, it is my belief that register variation is given short shrift in the typical Spanish classroom.

### **4 Why should register be taught in the second language classroom?**

The two anecdotes with which I began suggest that native speakers do indeed perceive that something is amiss when a non-native speaker fails to use the appropriate register to

communicate a message. The fact that both of these colleagues had completed graduate study in Spanish when the episodes occurred also suggests that while learning the language, they had not been provided with the necessary tools to acquire register variation. And as Briz (1998: 16) points out, “la falta de adecuación entre el uso y la situación provoca desajustes no tanto informativos como de conducta lingüística esperable. Es decir, rotas ciertas convenciones, el acto comunicativo, desde la perspectiva del interlocutor, conlleva un cierto fracaso.” In addition to the potential for miscommunication, students should be sensitized to register variation so that they might avoid another potential pitfall – naively adapting speech that they hear which is unacceptable to the native interlocutor.

Batchelor and Pountain (1992: 4) warn of this danger: “In both the popular and educated mind, there is a close association between ‘correctness’ and the ‘standard’ language: features of local varieties and registers which differ from the ‘standard’ are deemed in this way ‘incorrect’ even though they are regularly used by native speakers.” Butt and Benjamin (1996: ix) also advise that “[f]oreign students will constantly hear colloquial and popular forms, but pending real fluency in the language they should use them – especially popular forms – with caution. In any language, some things that pass unnoticed in relaxed native speech sound shocking when spoken with a foreign accent.” Such colloquial and popular forms are marked in both grammars.

Schiffrin (1996: 323) recommends an overt approach to dealing with register variation and encourages language teachers to discuss the social meanings of grammatical structures. Perhaps it is possible to make a comparison between the overt teaching of register and the overt teaching of articulatory phonetics. Arteaga (2000) critiques the communicative methodological approaches of recent decades, which have tended to result in a “hands-off” approach to the

teaching of pronunciation. She explains that input is frequently given as an addendum, with practice provided only in the lab manual. She convincingly argues that input alone is not sufficient—research shows that explicit formal instruction of the phonetic system is the key to facilitating students' development of a native-like accent (341-342). She states further that such training is essential, from a sociolinguistic perspective. Even if a second language speaker's imperfect phonetic system does not impede communication, "it is NOT the case that accented speech is neutrally received by the listener" (342). A business person working with such a phonetic system could thus be placed at a distinct disadvantage. In the same sense, if s/he lacks sensitivity to register variation, her/his problems are compounded. I would argue that an equally explicit approach, with in-class discussion, as suggested by Schiffirin, and practice activities, as per Arteaga's advice, should be taken to help students develop sensitivity to register variation.

## **5 Spanish Textbooks and Register**

The textbooks I analyze for input on register variation include six that are intended for use at the intermediate (second year) level, and four used at the the third year level (fifth and sixth semesters). Table 2 provides a summary of the relevant features. While all of these books provide register input of some kind, only one of them takes an overt and systematic approach. All of them present vocabulary, of course, but in terms of register input, they do little more than present such phrases, for example, as polite vs. informal ways to meet and greet. None broaches the subject of taboo lexicon, and popular speech is given scant or no mention. The grammar presented in all of these books is fairly standard, with no mention of the possibility that certain pragmatic implications may be expressed in particular contexts (e.g. politeness) through grammar.

**Table 2: Register Analysis of Texts**

Author	1	2	3	4	5
Bretz	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Lee	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Levy-Konesky	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Rusch	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Spinelli	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Zayas-Bazán	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Crapotta	Y	Y	N	N	N
García-Serrano	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iorillo	N*	N	N	N	N
Ponce de León	N**	Y	N	N	N

Y = yes      N = no

\*This text supplies only essays on various socio-cultural topics, written in formal style.

\*\*Here each unit begins with a written dialogue. No literature is included, but there are some essays dealing with linguistic and other issues (e.g. the influx of English lexemes in Spanish).

- 1 – Are samples of formal written Spanish included (e.g. literature, essay, business letters)?
- 2 – Are more informal written registers exemplified (e.g. personal correspondence, ads)?
- 3 – Is there audio material illustrating native speech, with corresponding written exercises?
- 4 – Is there a video illustrating real-language interactions in differing contexts, with exercises?
- 5 – Does the text offer activities coordinated with movies?

The one text that deals with register in an in-depth, systematic way was written by Spinelli et al. In all units of this book, there is a corresponding “Así se habla” section, each of which includes an oral dialogue (taped with partial written text provided), pre-and post-listening activities, and a broad range of functions and contexts: agreeing and disagreeing, ordering in a restaurant, expressing good will, making personal and business phone calls, making introductions, etc. Perhaps the next-best treatment may be found in García-Serrano et al. In the communicative strategies sections that appear throughout this text, the authors provide short lists of 4-6 vocabulary items that could be used as the basis for a lesson on register (e.g. meeting and greeting for the first time, both formal and informal situations). Missing from the text, however, are adequate follow-up activities that would enable students to practice; and the variants, to be sure, are somewhat limited in scope.



Some texts offer students sporadic information that could be expanded upon to deal more fully with register variation. For example, Rusch et al include a “¿Lo sabían?” section that explains the use of register sensitive items (e.g. the phenomenon of friends who use nicknames based on physical characteristics). Lee et al include an “Así se dice” section that deals with vocabulary variation that is register-specific (e.g. “Cyberspanglish” [sic]). Levy-Konesky et al ask students to complete a vocabulary exercise that treats the “poetic language” of Carlos Santana, after they have viewed a video segment dedicated to the artist.

There is some attempt to deal with the context of a speech act. Rusch et al teach students how to identify the audience for whom a written essay is intended. A follow-up communicative activity is incorporated after this lesson—students create and perform interviews between Uruguayan executives and job candidates. Lee et al directly broach the subject of register variation on at least one occasion. In one “Consejo práctico” section, for example, they state that “getting your roommate to do something requires different language than you would use to persuade your boss to do something” (66). No further input is given, but students are instructed to keep that idea in mind when performing the follow-up activity.

Perhaps the greatest strength (in terms of register variation input) that all of the more recent texts have is their inclusion of a variety of written texts in different fields and tenors. All of them include at least three of the following: literary readings (poetry and prose), essays on cultural topics, letters (both official business types and personal correspondence), newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, and cartoons. However, never are these texts exploited to their full extent as tools to discuss register variation.

Finally, all of the texts included in our discussion do make a good effort to give students oral input. The lab tapes or CDs and their manuals provide authentic speech produced by native

speakers, with follow-up activities. A number of them also have a video tape that is coordinated with cultural topics, enabling students to see real interactions using natural language. And one of the texts, by García-Serrano et al, integrates movies systematically. The latter offers a variety of pre- and post-viewing activities. Nevertheless, these authors fail to fully capitalize on this rich resource for analyzing register variation.

## **6 Strategies for developing register sensitivity**

Halliday's concept of register variation is complex. Perhaps it would be better for the instructor to base her/his approach on Bachelor and Pountain's (1992: 3) "rough and ready" classifications: R1-informal, colloquial usage with slang and vulgarisms (the latter of which should be avoided in most contexts); R2-careful, educated speech and informal writing; and R3-formal written language. And of course, the key sociolinguistic question that should underlie our strategies is "Who uses what structures with whom, and where?" One could then try the following strategies. This short list is by no means exhaustive, but is meant to provide a few possibilities for consideration.

### **A. Expand upon the grammatical lessons in the text.**

Schiffrin (1996: 323) offers us one idea. All of the texts herein treated deal with making requests. One way of attempting to get what we want, of course, is to use a command form. Schiffrin rightly points out that imperatives are often used in situations of asymmetric power (e.g. by an employer giving a directive to an employee). In order for students to understand this sociolinguistic reality, discuss the implications of their using a direct command. Give examples that would be appropriate in different contexts (e.g. use indirect commands, or a polite expression such as "quisiera ..." or "me gustaría ..." to make a request). Provide students with a

short list of situations and appropriate grammatical forms they should use in such contexts. Then have them role-play a series of different situations that you supply.

A second example—all of our textbooks review the imperfect aspect of the past tense. However, the noncanonical use of the imperfect to encode a speaker's polite attitude toward her/his addressee is not typically broached. We could consider this a serious omission—according to a recent study by Chodorowska-Pilch (2000), this use of the imperfect is a systematic, widely conventionalized, perhaps even grammaticalized, feature of native Spanish. Adding a discussion of pragmatic implications would provide students with an important tool for dealing with register variation. The role-play would be useful once more. Give students contexts (e.g. going to inquire about tickets at a travel agency, or getting information from a clerk in a department store) in which to utilize phrases such as “Quería hacer un viaje a España” and “Venía a comprar un regalo para mi mamá.” Other structures that could be included in such a discussion of politeness encoding include the conditional and the future.

B. Make use of the input provided by the teaching materials.

All of the books on our list present at least some texts that reflect written and even oral register variation. Have students actively seek answers to questions about language and context/function, as they work with this input. Help them analyze dialogue from literary readings. Look at advertising language, and discuss the use of the pronouns of address. Is it *Ud/Uds?* *Tú/vosotros?* Or even *vos?* Have students focus on the differences between a letter written by a daughter to her parents and a business correspondence. Ask them to write their own letters, incorporating features appropriate to the context. Cartoons are often an excellent source of register-sensitive speech. Have students read a series of “Mafalda” strips. How does she

interact with her parents? Her teachers? Strangers on the street? Manolito and Susanita? As a culminating activity, give students blank strips and have them collaborate to create the dialogue.

If the text includes natural speech samples on audio and/or video tapes, use them to good effect. Ask students to identify the situation, to analyze the language used, and then to produce their own register-appropriate dialogues. If the text is one like *¡A que sí!*, and offers numerous exercises coordinated with movies, have students go one step further than the book exercises. They can view a film like “Todo sobre mi madre”, identify vulgarisms, analyze the ways in which characters interact and identify salient features of the language. After working with any of these audiovisual sources, students could be given a chance to acquire features actively by role-playing, creating their own dialogues and performing them.

C. Seek input from other sources and incorporate it into the lesson.

I will end this section by giving several ways to go beyond the textbook. First, the *telenovela* is an excellent source of oral register variation. Students can learn who the characters are and become interested in their lives, understand what their social status is, and of course, analyze dialogues that are repeated time and again between the same characters, and in much the same format. Have students plan their own short novela, taking on different roles, creating register-appropriate dialogue, and staging the production. To save time in class, have students videotape their *novelas* outside of class. This would be an ideal semester project for a third year conversation class.

Finally, perhaps the best source of input on register variation are native speakers themselves. We should tap into the rich resource which is abundantly available to us in the U.S. by having students talk to the native speakers who attend our universities and/or live in our communities. Replace a weekly lab assignment with this one: students go to an event where

native speakers are gathered (a party, a language house activity, a soccer match in the community, etc.), and, already armed with knowledge of register variation, take note of the ways in which native speakers interact with each other. They could then compare notes when back in the classroom.

## 7 Conclusion

Admittedly, the task I am proposing here is not an easy one. Many of us are already at a disadvantage due to the over-large groups of students enrolled in our language classes. We must give students time to practice oral and listening skills, help them understand grammatical structures, teach vocabulary and phonetic systems, and enable students to develop cultural sensitivity as well as reading and writing skills. And then there is the question of teacher preparation. Undoubtedly, the native speaker will be able to rely on her/his real-life experiences. The non-native speaker has a greater challenge, especially if her/his preparation did not include analysis of register variation, or at least a prolonged period of study or residence in a Spanish-speaking country. However, I do believe that the study of this key feature of natural speech must be dealt with, and that it can be more fully integrated into our regular lessons. I conclude by encouraging Spanish instructors to seek creative ways to make this happen.

## Textbooks Reviewed

### Intermediate Level

Bretz, Mary Lee, Trisha Dvorak and Carl Kirschner. 1997. *Pasajes*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.

Lee, James F., et al. 2000. *¿Qué te parece?* 2nd. ed. Boston: McGraw Hill.

Levy-Konesky, Nancy, Karen Daggett and Lois Cecsarini. 1996. *Nuevas fronteras*. 3rd ed. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Rusch, Debbie, Marcela Domínguez and Lucía Caycedo Garner. 1996. *Fuentes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Spinelli, Emily, Carmen García and Carol E. Galvin. 1994. *Interacciones*. 2nd ed. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Zayas-Bazán, Eduardo, Susan M. Bacon and Dulce García. 1999. *Conexiones*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

### Third Year Level

Crapotta, James and Alicia Ramos. 1994. *Facetas: conversación y redacción*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

García-Serrano, M. Victoria, Cristina de la Torre and Annette Grant Cash. 1999. *¡A que sí!* 2nd ed. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Iorillo, Nino R. and Andrés C. Díaz. 1996. *Conversación y controversia*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NY: Prentice Hall.

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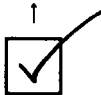
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